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Black Muslims and the Angels of Afrofuturism

ELLEN MCLARNEY AND SOLAYMAN IDRIS

Islam uses for its Signs the Sun, Moon, and the Star. These three elements (of Nature) are the most essential for our well-being and they represent a physical work of Freedom, Justice, and Equality.

—Elijah Muhammad, *The Supreme Wisdom*¹

In his 1962 “Black Man’s History” speech, Malcolm X recounted Nation of Islam (NOI) teachings about original wise Black men who were masters of science, describing them as “angels.”² They can look through the “wheel of time” and see not only what people on Earth are thinking, but what their “unborn children’s children are thinking.”

The wise black man who was a master of science never wrote his history like it is written today, of the past. The wise black man in that day wrote his history in the future ... on this Earth there are wise black men who can tune in and tell what’s going to happen in the future just as clearly—they can see ahead just as clear—as they can see in the past.³

One of these scientists, Yakub, bred the white race through experiments on the original people, a teaching that allegorically represents crimes of racial and sexual violence as a eugenics campaign of genocide against Black life.⁴ It also invokes an *a priori* Black

past that existed before the poisoning effects of white racism—an origins teaching framed as myth science, if not considered science fiction.

Just before his death, Malcolm X appeared as one of these “wise black men who can tune in and tell what’s going to happen in the future.” In an interview, he is repeatedly asked: “Where do you think your future lies?” He responds: “I’ll never get old.” Startled, the interviewer asks, “What does that mean?” Malcolm answers: “A black man should give his life to be free and when you really think like that, you don’t live long. And if freedom doesn’t come to your lifetime, it’ll come to your children.”⁵ Though he clearly saw his life cut short, he perhaps could not have foreseen the extent of the impact of his life, voice, and vision, possibilities he opened for Black liberation through Islam, and outpouring of cultural and intellectual production he inspired. Malcolm X—as others before him—helped raise consciousness about the centrality of Blackness in Islam, decolonize Islam as an Arab religion (as with the *shu’ubiyya* movement previously), and revive possibilities for social justice, possibilities not yet fulfilled, but re-envisioned by new generations of Black Muslims in Chicago, Detroit, New York, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Oakland, and in the diaspora.

The Black Arts Movement (BAM), that partly grew out of Malcolm X’s life and death, converted teachings from African American Islamic movements—like the Moorish Science Temple of America (MSTA), Ahmadiyya, and Nation of Islam (NOI)—into early Afrofuturist cultural production. In the process, BAM artists translated

Black Muslim ideas, symbols, and cosmologies into broader parlance through performance, poetry, music, and drama that circulated in the Black counterpublic. Nestled like easter eggs in Afrofuturist art, albeit transformed by the artists' creative visions, Islamic elements were sometimes dissimulated as hidden transcripts or codes, decipherable only to the initiated. MSTA ideas about angels—and devils—and NOI conceptions of the Mother Plane surface and re-surface in Afrofuturist cultural production, as “Black angels of history” and the Mothership, vehicles and agents of mental, spiritual, physical, and temporal transport. This essay explores how MSTA and NOI teachings about angels and planes influenced early modes of Afrofuturist experimentation, as visionaries like Sun Ra and Amiri Baraka coded esoteric language integral to the eschatology of the MSTA and NOI into their work. In conscious and unconscious ways, this imagery shaped the Afrofuturist imaginary, forging profound, and profoundly religious, connections between questions of fugitivity, flight, and survival in the past, present, and future. The connection to African American Islamic movements, however, is not always recognized as such.

Masons, Muslims, and Secret Societies

Though Sun Ra, one of the most important progenitors of the Afrofuturist imaginary, was not Muslim, he did claim kinship with Elijah Muhammad through their shared birth-name Poole.⁶ In a 1986 interview, longtime Arkestra member John Gilmore asserted that Black Muslims borrowed ideas that Sun Ra circulated in his broadsheets and pamphlets

—like the connection of the word “negro” to “necro” (i.e., death) and the use of X to replace the “slave name.”⁷ Sun Ra’s influence on the Black Muslims—and vice versa—is something explored in John Szwed’s *Space is the Place*, Graham Lock’s *Blutopia*, John Corbett’s *Wisdom of Sun-Ra*, Brent Hayes Edward’s *Epistrophes*, and William Sites’s *Sun Ra’s Chicago*. The assumption is that the “Black Muslims” that Sun Ra influenced (or that influenced him) were NOI, but they may have (also) been MSTA.⁸ The MSTA circulated the negro/necro connection in their catechism “Koran Questions for Moorish Children” before Herman “Sonny” Blount first visited Chicago in his senior year of high school.⁹ Sonny traveled there in 1932 to perform with his music teacher John “Fess” Whatley’s band, not long after Noble Drew Ali’s well publicized death. Sun Ra’s pamphlet “Jesus said, ‘Let the Negro bury the Negro’” is structured as a series of questions and answers, much like the “Koran Questions,” defining “Negro or Necro” as “dead body” much like the “Koran Questions” defines Negro and the word Black as death.¹⁰ Sun Ra might have picked up these ideas from the MSTA as it circulated in Chicago’s cultural and religious ether, with key elements of their teachings informing his name, dress, and philosophical ruminations on “angelic planes of being.”¹¹

Sun Ra and his manager Alton Abraham distributed their broadsheets in Chicago’s Washington Park just off 54th Street, only a few blocks from the MSTA’s headquarters on Wabash Avenue.¹² In 1952, Sonny legally changed his name to Le Sony’r Ra from his birth name, signing some of his early broadsheets “El Ra,” gesturing,

alongside the “El” in El Saturn Research, toward MSTA names that use “El” to express a Moorish identity (in addition to the Ottoman Turkish “Bey”). The name “El Ra” evokes Egyptian cosmology, but also speaks of the Moorish Islamic identity of the MSTA. In some of his pamphlets, Sun Ra also plays on the word “Israel,” signing them “Is-Ra-El,” deploying his trademark homophonic punning to simultaneously reference Egyptian cosmology, Hebrew Bible, and MSTA language.¹³ Sun Ra’s early recording “El is the Sound of Joy” (1956) references the “El” (“elevated”) train in Chicago, but similarly returns to the El of Elohim, al-El, Allah (allah), El Ra. He and his band wore red fezzes and MSTA colors, red and green, until someone “warned them to never wear fezzes again.”¹⁴ Photographs from the 1950s show Sun Ra wearing fezzes: a promotional headshot published in a 1957 *Chicago Defender* announcement of a performance by “Sun-Ra and his Modern Jazz band” and a 1958 studio portrait showing him in red fez.¹⁵ MSTA members wore fezzes, but also versions of ancient Egyptian headdress, as well as turbans with God’s eyes and suns, iconography that featured prominently in Sun Ra’s later performances, like in the film *Space is the Place*.¹⁶ But this kind of dress was also worn by the Shriners and the Black Shriners—the Ancient (Egyptian) Arabic Order (of the) Nobles (of the) Mystic Shrine—that influenced the MSTA’s own sense of African Americans’ specific historical, cultural, spiritual, and linguistic relationship to Muslim West Africa.

Because their white counterparts refused to admit Blacks, Black Shriners formed a separate group, as did Prince Hall freemasons.



Figure 1: Promotional headshot of Sun Ra in a fez, *Chicago Defender* (vol. 53, no. 11) July 13, 1957, courtesy of Sun Ra LLC.

These secret societies became powerful organizations countering white economic and social discrimination during Jim Crow and the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan itself heavily recruited from Masons and Shriners, modeling its hierarchy, structure, rituals, names, and secrecy on these other fraternal organizations.¹⁷ When the MSTA emerged in the 1920s, white Shriners were targeting Black Shriners with court cases aiming to restrain them from using similar signs, symbols, and regalia, with one case argued before the Supreme Court. The MSTA drew on symbolism from the Black

Shriners that used Arabic and Islamic language, names, and places (like “Koran,” “Kaaba,” “Mecca,” and “Moslem”); called their lodges temples; and wore sashes, turbans, and fezzes.¹⁸ During this period, the KKK began circulating a handbook of ritual practice called the “Kloran,” appropriating the Shriners’ Islamic imagery.¹⁹ Noble Drew Ali’s *Circle 7 Koran* and *Koran Questions for Moorish Children*,²⁰ alongside the Black Shriners’ Islamic language and symbolism, became powerful counter-imaginaries to the Klan’s white racial terror and their Christian symbolism of a cross with a drop of blood at the center.

Sun Ra himself was no stranger to Freemasonry, circulating in masonic circles intellectually and musically throughout his life. He seems “to have hidden in plain sight as a freemason throughout his career,” writes music critic John Lewis.²¹ Similarly, Kodwo Eshun poetically describes Sun Ra as a “MaSonic Scientist in the Rrkestral Monastery.”²² When he was ten, Sonny became deeply involved with the African American fraternal organization the American Woodmen, an insurance group with its own military ranks, nurses, bands, youth groups, and sometimes, libraries, whose members wore blue fezzes.²³ In high school, Sonny spent his days reading at the Booker T. Washington Library, the first lending library open to Black citizens of Birmingham, located at the state headquarters of the Prince Hall Masons and its women’s counterpart the Order of the Eastern Star. Called the “Colored Masonic Temple,” it also housed the offices of the NAACP, Southern Negro Youth Congress, Jefferson County Negro Democratic Youth League, and Right to Vote Club.²⁴ In 1932,

Sonny’s senior year in high school, the Masonic lodge hosted a fundraiser for the Scottsboro Boys trial—one of Birmingham’s first major civil rights events. Duke Ellington and Count Basie regularly played in the Masonic Temple’s auditorium and after Sun Ra graduated high school, his band The Nighthawks of Harmony played there every Monday night, as well as in white areas known as KKK strongholds.²⁵ In KKK parlance, a Nighthawk is a courier—and was the name of a Klan newspaper in the South.²⁶ The appropriation of this imagery subverted it, even as the band’s name presaged Sonny’s adoption of the name “Ra,” the Egyptian god depicted as a falcon (Egyptian imagery also being an integral element of Shriner ritual). Even then, Sonny gestured toward imagery of flight across the sky.

Angels and Birds

Theosophical texts that Sonny studied at the Masonic temple later became part of the course he taught at Berkeley “The Black Man in the Cosmos” in the early 1970s, in their newly formed program in Ethnic Studies that included African American studies. His reading list included works like Helena Blavatsky’s *Secret Doctrine* (1888) that talks about the creation of the first races as “Solar Angels,” “‘shadows’ or *astral bodies*” thrown from the Creator.²⁷ The Theosophist Alice Bailey developed this idea of Solar Angels in her book *Initiation, Human and Solar*: “the medium for expressing the pure spirit,” citizens not of any one planet, but of the solar system.”²⁸ Sun Ra recommended to his students *The Brotherhood of Angels and of Men* (1927) by Geoffrey

Hodson, who also authored *Angels and the New Race* (1929).²⁹ Sun Ra scholar John Szwed summarizes Hodson's influence on Sun Ra's teachings: "Angels of music are God's instrument: they glow with the color of their song, and every light and sound is an echo of God's voice and eyes. Humans are the instruments they play on."³⁰ Other course readings included Pjotr Demianovitch Ouspensky's *A New Model of the Universe* (1931) which describes angels and demons as "invisible races or spirits, which at the same time are similar to humans in their relation to higher forces." The book argues that only music and esoteric symbolism can communicate the truths of the divine order to the spirit.³¹ The name Sun Ra seems to suggest a Solar Angel, a citizen of the solar system, giving expression to the truths of the cosmic order through the language of music.

Noble Drew Ali included Theosophical texts in his *Circle 7 Koran*—incorporating passages from Levi Dowling's *Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ* and *Unto Thee I Grant, or The Infinite Wisdom*—reshaping them with Islamic language referencing Allah and Mecca, the "divine origin of the Asiatic races," and their "special covenant" with God.³² The *Circle 7 Koran* also explores mystical conceptions about "ether planes" of angels and cherubim "in harmony with Allah"—planes that all creatures can perceive with "the eyes of the soul ... The plane of the soul is but the ether of the spirit plane vibrating." When the bird sings its song, humans "vibrate in unison to help it sing."³³

The MSTA catechism "Koran Questions for Moorish Children" uses similar language to talk about angels as "the thought of ALLAH

manifested in human flesh;" Noble Drew Ali as "an Angel of Allah;" and Asiatics and Moorish Americans as "the modern name for these Angels." The higher self is the "Mother of virtues and the harmonies of life, breed[ing] Justice, Mercy, Love, and Right ... ALLAH in MAN;" the lower-self is Lucifer, Satan, Devil, and the Beast.³⁴ NOI conceptions of angels and blue-eyed devils developed in dialogue with these teachings, with Elijah Muhammad calling NOI founder Wallace Fard Muhammad an "angel."³⁵ It is a religious discourse that demonizes white racism, but also sanctifies Black (Asiatic) life.

Concepts of angels and demons suffuse Sun Ra's poems, lyrics, and song titles from his earliest recordings on El Saturn. His 1956 "A Call for All Demons" and "Demon's Lullaby" became the B side of the later *Angels and Demons at Play*, experimental tracks that play on dissonant "space chords." The Myth Science Arkestra later released *When Angels Speak of Love* (1966) revisiting the conceptualization of music as mediation with the divine. This became the title of bell hooks's 2007 collection of poetry, dedicated to "angels who go before, making ready the way." hooks's collection opens with an epigraph from the Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson describing the celestial "language" of angels, spoken even if none understand, distinct from the "hissing and unmusical dialects of men."³⁶ Sun Ra's poem "When Angels Speak" served as a poetic accompaniment to his album, elucidating what that language sounds like.

When angels speak
They speak of cosmic waves of sound
Wavelength infinity
Always touching planets ...

Synchronizing the rays of black darkness
Into visible being
Blackout!
Dark Living Myth-world of being.³⁷

Sun Ra's own homophonic, punning style plays on the word "rays" in the verse "synchronizing the rays of black darkness," destabilizing and re-imagining "race" as "rays" in the poesis of his "tone poem."³⁸ Frequencies, vibrations, and wavelengths become modes of tapping into the esoteric language of the cosmos and the planets, like rays in the darkness. Another poem "Cosmos Evolution" in *The Immeasurable Equation* describes "angelic planes of being" vibrating through music, echoing the Theosophical ideas in the *Circle 7 Koran*.³⁹ Through multiple layers of referentiality—to sound and sight, wavelengths and rays, visibility and invisibility—Sun Ra situates this language of angels as celestial frequencies in the cosmos, perceived through the sensory world of seeing, touching, and hearing. It is the opposite of what Elijah Muhammad called "blind, deaf, and dumb."⁴⁰

Sun Ra revisited this angelic language—and its relationship to sound, color, and "rays"—in a 1983 interview at the Knitting Factory, commenting that angels are

different orders of being, for each order has its own way and weigh of being, just as each color has its own vibration. My measurement of race is rate of vibration—beams, rays. ... In the scheme of things even the least of the brothers has his day, and when you realize the meaning of that day, you will feel the presence of an angel in disguise.⁴¹

In his poetry Sun Ra also wrote about birds soaring into the future. His identification with Ra, the Egyptian sun god portrayed as a falcon suggests flight as he travels the skies in his b/ark. But Ra is also an emblem of rebirth and renewal, as the creator of all life. The bird also suggests survival—as the one creature who has survived since the dinosaurs.⁴² In his first album recorded under the name Sun Ra, the liner notes include a poem for the track "New Horizons" where Sun Ra compares himself to a bird, turning flight and fugitivity into a musical and poetic fugue.

Soaring like a bird
Through the threads and fringes of today
Straight to the heart of tomorrow ...
Loosening the chains that bind,
Ennobling the mind
With all the many greater dimensions
Of a living tomorrow.⁴³

Sun Ra called himself "a messenger to, from, and of ... You can listen to me if you want to or not. I'm like the birds who sing in the trees."⁴⁴ The bird continues to function "as an avatar for Afro-Speculative making" in Afrofuturist cultural production, as Reynaldo Anderson observes in his *Black Angel of History* online exhibit. Its wings and flight are angel-like, just as the angel is bird-like. The Sankofa bird is another of these avatars, as illustrated by Quentin VerCetty in his AstroSankofa work that configures the Black Angel through reference to the Sankofa. "The Black African diasporic experience is like that of a rising phoenix," writes VerCetty in Anderson's exhibit, imagery also portrayed in Black Kirby's #BlackHistoryMatters

artwork.⁴⁵ It's "Sankofa Time," the poet Antoinette T. Jackson writes, playing on "It's Nation Time" by Sun Ra's BAM collaborator Amiri Baraka: "My world/ had been created by your very survival."⁴⁶

Surviving Genocide

Sun Ra's broadsheets, music, and poetry wove Black Muslim texts, mysticism, sense of identity and belonging into his myth science philosophy. But he explicitly engaged the NOI's creation myth in his collaboration with Baraka on *A Black Mass*, written in Harlem in 1965, performed in Newark in 1966, recorded as an album in 1968, and published in 1969. *A Black Mass* (1965) emphasized the science fiction sensibility in the NOI teaching about the scientist Yakub's creation of white devils from the "original Black men." According to Elijah Muhammad, Yakub was one of the original wise men who grafted the white race from Black life, killing Black children, and telling the parents their "angel child" had gone to heaven.⁴⁷ In his essay on genetic engineering and UFOs in NOI teachings, Edward Curtis observes that the Yakub teaching seems to suggest Auschwitz as well as "racist eugenics programs in the United States."⁴⁸ Scholars like Alondra Nelson, Werner Sollors, and Melani McAlister discuss how *A Black Mass* functions as an allegory of white genocide against Black life and of white violence against Black women, developing elements already present in the Yakub teaching.⁴⁹ In a frightening fulfillment of the teaching's social commentary, Baraka's pregnant girlfriend Olabumi Osafemi died from an embolism only a few months after her performance

in the play, along with their baby.⁵⁰ Alondra Nelson grapples with Baraka's vision of scientific racism and genocidal eugenics in her own analysis of the play, published in the wake of her seminal 2002 special issue of *Social Text* on Afrofuturism.⁵¹

Sun Ra and Baraka's collaboration created a new kind of jazz poetics that was the signature style of both artists and of the BAM as a whole.⁵² The stage directions set the tone:

Jet blackness, with maybe a blue or red-violet glow. Soft peaceful music (Sun-Ra). Music of eternal concentration and wisdom... The outline of some fantastic chemical laboratory is seen, with weird mixtures bubbling, colored solutions (or solutions that glow in the dark). Signs in Arabic and Swahili on the wall. Strange drawings, diagrams of weird machines.⁵³

Baraka describes the Black scientists as magicians wearing a skullcap, a fez, and a fila, infusing Black Muslim tones into his dramatization. His writing of the time talks about jazz musicians and artists who embraced Islam, as well as what he calls the spirit conscious music of Sun Ra, Pharoah Sanders, John Coltrane, and Albert Ayler. The new music releases "an energy ... taking everyone on a trip to visit another place ... spiritual precincts of its emotional telling where Black people move in almost absolute openness and strength." He describes the music as "vibrations of a feeling, of a particular place, a conjunction of world spirit."⁵⁴

In the Bible, Jacob, or Yakub, wrestled with the angel (the angel of history?) taking the name Isra-El, meaning "struggling with God." His name Israel suggests the promise

of a homeland in the face of genocide, a promise unfulfilled for Black nationalists, despite efforts like the “We Charge Genocide” petition brought to the UN and Malcolm X’s own draft petition. Medical eugenics, scientific racism, and holocaust haunt the Yakub teaching, as does the denial of a “land of our own” and full citizenship.⁵⁵ Sun Ra talked about how all the governments of the world

have conspired to destroy the nations of black people. The consequence though has been that there now exists a separate kind of human being, the American Black man. And I should say that he doesn’t belong on this Earth ... because they live in harmony with the Creator of the cosmos. And they will always be a source of difficulty for every nation of this planet, because they’ve no other ruler than the Creator of the cosmos and they’re faithful only to him.⁵⁶

Israel, Sun Ra argues, is not that people, because they have become “one of the nations of the world, at least in the United Nations, but not the American Black people.”⁵⁷

The Black Angel prepares “a future African Zion beyond this place of wrath and tears,” write Tiffany Barber and Reynaldo Anderson, in their essay “The Black Angel of History and the Age of Necrocapitalism.” They call for moving beyond Walter Benjamin’s concept of the “Angel of History,” but the angel is embedded in this history of ethnic and religious nationalism, holocaust, genocide, mass death, and the “hydra of Necrocapitalism.”⁵⁸ Flight and fugitivity for survival are

also coded into Benjamin’s essay “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” written just before his suicide, as he fled, fearing internment in a Nazi death camp. Though he does not talk about racial cleansing, he writes about the struggling, oppressed classes avenging the enslaved, completing “the task of liberation in the name of generations of the downtrodden,” awakening the dead, and making “whole what has been smashed.”⁵⁹ The future glimmers in the promise of a Mahdi, the Messiah, subduing the Antichrist, bringing the end of the time of white racial terror, and promising divine justice. Benjamin’s language resonates with Elijah Muhammad’s, who called Wallace Fard Muhammad an angel and “the Mahdi” “awakening the dead” to knowledge of self, just as Malcolm X repeatedly characterized Elijah Muhammad as a Moses leading his people to freedom.⁶⁰ (In Anderson’s “Black Angel of History” exhibit, his collaborator the Reverend Andrew Rollins similarly describes an avenger, coming “from a distant celestial realm bearing a message that cuts like a lightning sword of life and death.”)⁶¹ What Benjamin calls the flash of memory—and of awakened consciousness—is a spark of hope in the rubble of history, glimmering in the debris of the present.

Survival—and life—are at the heart of the quest to arrive at and inhabit the future, escaping the threat of genocide, social death, and the poisoning effects of racism on mental and physical health. This poison is at the heart of the Yakub teaching’s message about medical racism, eugenics, and sexual violence. Elijah Muhammad compared racial oppression to a poison, like “being bitten by a rattlesnake,” talking about

“the serpent-like Caucasian devil ... this race of devils as corresponding to the nature of a snake (serpent).”⁶² Chelle Barbour’s collage “The Bluest Eye,” exhibited in Oakland Museum of California’s “Mothership: Voyage Into Afrofuturism” (2022) depicts this image: a Black, blue-eyed woman has a snake wrapped around her neck, recalling Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, which itself metareferences NOI ideas about “blue eyed devils,” the poisoning effects of white racism, and its genocidal consequences for Black life. In Barbour’s artwork, the snake seems to be a whip, but also sprouts feathers, turning the woman into a kind of *quetzal-coatl*, resonating with VerCetty’s sense of the rising phoenix of the Black African diasporic experience.

The Cosmic Rays

Amiri Baraka’s writing on the new jazz understood it as bringing new life breathed into the music through the horns, but also as infused with spirit, playing on the etymology of spirit and inspiration as breath. These ideas permeated his writing of this time, just before his own conversion to Islam, as he wrote about Black music—and specifically the Myth Science Arkestra—as “consciously Spiritual Music,” a “Life Force” that is “one of the creative functions of the universe,” creating “beautiful black sound-worlds.”⁶³ The Arkestra uses “Wisdom Religion” toward “actual evolution through space, not only in space ships, but of the higher principles of humanity, the progress after the death of the body.”⁶⁴ In an essay about Sun Ra, Marion Brown, and Pharoah Sanders, Baraka writes about their music as “soul,



Figure 2: Chelle Barbour’s “The Bluest Eye” at Oakland Museum of California’s “Mothership: Voyage Into Afrofuturism” exhibit, December 3, 2021–February 27, 2022.

anima, spirit (*spiritus*, breath), as that which carries breath or the living wind. We are animate because we breathe. And the spirit breathes in us ... There is no life without spirit.” Some human beings exist without soul, though, and he uses NOI imagery of evil things “breathing high-valence poison gases internalized into argon-blue eyes,” language that also speaks of the holocaust.⁶⁵ Baraka’s language draws directly from Sun Ra, who wrote in his broadsheets:

Those who are of the spirit are like the wind.
The wind and the spirit are immaterial. All
spiritual things are based upon the word

SPIRIT. Those who are spiritual are immaterial. The most spiritual are the most immaterial. The negroes are more spiritual than white people. As a result, negroes are immaterial to the white people who are a material and animal minded people.⁶⁶

We see a circulation of ideas, a call and response, a feedback loop in the creative work of these poets and musicians, intellectuals and philosophers, reshaping the creative landscape of American life, but also its spirit, through a universe differently imagined.⁶⁷

The poems in Baraka's 1972 collection *Spirit Reach* are Afrofuturistic expressions of his sense of the cosmic order, inflected with Islamic language, signs, and symbols from his study of Islam as a "spiritual philosophy."⁶⁸ He calls himself a Black holy man, a magician, a star

of the cosmic stage, spinning in my
appointed orbit
giving orders to my dreams, ordering my
imagination
that the world it gives birth to is the beautiful
quranic vision ...⁶⁹

He also plays on the word Allah as "us all" and drawing on Sun Ra's sense of "rays":

Time space manifest into the unity of
the creator ... and we live as flying images of
endless imagination. Listen to the creator
speak in me now. Listen, these words
are part of God's thing. I am a vessel, a black
priest interpreting
the present & future for my people ...
Allah speaks in and

thru me now ...

The energy The energy the energy the rays
of God roared thru us all ... uh
rays of God plunged thru us all-uh⁷⁰

Afrofuturist imagery about the time space continuum, flying images, endless imagination, and the future combines with Baraka's "quranic vision," as he plays on "rays of God" like Sun Ra. *Spirit Reach* was published through his Jihad Productions, as was the sound recording of *A Black Mass*, the place of publication listed as "New Ark." Similarly, his documentary film *The New-Ark* opens with the call to prayer, the recitation of the opening chapter of the Qur'an in Arabic, and a rehearsal of *A Black Mass* outside Spirit House—where they organized politically, gathered community, performed, rehearsed, and lived.⁷¹ "New Ark" paid tribute to Sun Ra's Arkestra, but also to stories that Noble Drew Ali called Newark "New Ark," founding the Moorish Science Canaanite Temple there.⁷²

Baraka's identification with Islam becomes a mode of mystical-spiritual identification and of survival in the face of the onslaught against Black life. In a climactic scene in *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* (1984), he describes the police beating him with guns and nightsticks during the Newark uprisings of 1967. As blood runs over his head, face, hands, and clothes, he shouts "Allahu Akbar. Al Homduliah [sic]!"—a *cri de coeur* at the heart of the rebellion. His beating, arrest, and incarceration made him feel

an absolute kinship with the suffering roots
of African American life ... What I had
screamed while they were trying to kill me.

“Al-Homdulliah [sic]!” All Praise the Power of Allah, the Power of Blackness. I felt transformed, literally shot into the eye of the black hurricane of the coming revolution.⁷³

Two weeks later, at a press conference for the Second Black Power conference in Newark, he held up a photograph of 19-year-old James Rutledge, who the police shot 39 times, raising “Malcolm’s correct dictum that the black struggle in the US was the struggle of a non-self-governing people against genocidal oppressors.”⁷⁴ In an essay about the Newark Uprisings in his 1971 collection *Raise, Race, Rays, Raze*, Baraka writes: “We must go to the United Nations and charge genocide and call for intervention.”⁷⁵ The language draws directly on Sun Ra: before becoming the Arkestra, his band was called The Cosmic Rays, a play on words that surfaces in Sun Ra’s poems, like “The Black Rays Race.” “See how the black rays of the black race/ Have touched the immeasurable wisdom/ ... See the unlimited freedom of the black rays.”⁷⁶ But the language of “immeasurable wisdom,” also evokes *The Infinite Wisdom* included the *Circle 7 Koran*, as well as Elijah Muhammad’s *Supreme Wisdom* (1957).

Planes of Wisdom

Coded into the fabric of Afrofuturist creativity are religious teachings about the apocalyptic promise of Ezekiel’s Wheel, the Mother Plane, and a winged redeemer ushering in a world beyond the evils of racial terror. In Afrofuturist sensibility, the angels of creation help chart the path to this new world,

through glimmers glimpsed in the dross of our present world, sonic vibrations on the plane of the soul, and frequencies emanating from other worlds. Understanding these esoteric idioms “requires a *poetics of discovery*,” write Stephen Finley, Margarita Guillory, and Hugh Page in “Africana Esoteric Studies.”⁷⁷ Sun Ra understood his own music as poetry and his poetry as music, what he called “tone poems” and “sound images.” He saw this jazz poetics as “pivoting planes” of sound and sight, a “mirror that you must hear/Vibration,” sensory planes of being that tap into other worlds at their juncture.⁷⁸

Sun Ra and Alton Abraham’s “Ihnfinity” corporation referenced these planes in its mission statement:

To perform spiritual worlds-dimensions-planes in galaxies and universes beyond the present now known used imagination of mankind, beyond the intergalactic central sun and works relative to spiritual advancement of our presently known world. To awaken the spiritual conscious of mankind putting him back in contact with his “Creator.”⁷⁹

Some scholars connect NOI teachings about the Mother Plane to Sun Ra’s Myth Science Arkestra—the “sonic and visual blueprint for what comes to be known as Afrofuturism,” as Roger Sneed writes in *The Dreamer and the Dream: Afrofuturism and Black Religious Thought*.⁸⁰ But these ideas about vibrations from “angelic planes of being” also echo the *Circle 7 Koran*, the “ether planes” of the angels and cherubin “in harmony with Allah.”⁸¹ These planes soar on wings, but are also planes of existence, thought, and the soul

—they should be understood as transcendent but also as immanent, manifesting in terms of survival, poiesis, musicality, and possibility.

The Ark, the Mother Plane, and the Mothership are all icons of the Afrofuturist imaginary, as well as Black Muslim esotericism, rooted in earlier iconography of sweet chariots and the Wheel of Ezekiel. Insightful scholarship by Michael Lieb, Stephen Finley, Edward E. Curtis, and others analyzes tropes of alienation, extra-territoriality, flight, and eschatological futurity in NOI teachings.⁸² Finley explores Louis Farrakhan's account of being captured by the Mother Plane as a transcendental(ist) re-writing of abduction through narratives of freedom through flight. He emphasizes that understanding the Mother Plane as a UFO is a "*hermeneutic necessity*" for grasping its transcendent potentiality.⁸³ Farrakhan's story resonates not just with Elijah Muhammad's account of the Mother Plane but also with Sun Ra's account of being guided by aliens to Saturn in 1936.⁸⁴ But it also resonates with other mystical accounts of traveling through the sky, like the narrative of the Prophet Muhammad's night journey on the winged mystical creature Buraq and his own ascension into the heavens. The Qur'an describes angels as messengers, as inspiration or revelation appearing on the horizon "by the star."⁸⁵ Both "inhabitants of the supralunar world" (Zakariyya al-Qazwini d. 1283) and "part of human civilization" (ibn Khaldun d. 1406), these winged creatures protect against devils. Angels, as well as the Prophet's ascension and night journey, are extensively portrayed in Islamic art and literature—what Isaiah Lavender might call a

"literary pre-history" of these winged planes of existence.⁸⁶

These visionary spiritual journeys through the cosmos open up worlds of being in the beyond, embedding religious tradition distant in time and space in the here and now, awakening the past in the present, and folding the afterlife into our actions today. In her short film, Jamika Ajalon calls the "M/othership" "a collective imago representing simultaneously alien territories, lands, beings, portals, and a communicatrix to other worlds."⁸⁷ Archeology provides a window onto some of those portals, with iconography of Ezekiel's wheel excavated alongside BaKongo cosmograms (a circle with an "X" inside) representing the universe, the path through this world, and the afterlife.⁸⁸ In his "Black Angel of History" artwork in Reynaldo Anderson's digital exhibition, Stacey Robinson superimposes the cosmogram like a halo on a winged angel (imagery that also surfaces in Black Quantum Futurism/Rasheedah Phillips's short film "Write No History").⁸⁹ Ezekiel's wheel, the cosmogram, and the Mother Plane do not chart a linear path in time or space, but rather, the future re-opens the past to in turn, re-fashion the future ("far from a linear, white temporality oriented by the idea of progress," but rather, "a circle with many arrows pointing outward in all directions").⁹⁰ The wheel of time is something of a cipher, "the completion of the circle," as in the *Supreme Mathematics* teachings of the Nation of Gods and Earths, a secret, a code, a number, the *sifr* in Arabic (zero) that marks the place between forward and backward, bringing 360° of knowledge, wisdom, and understanding full circle.⁹¹

The Keys to the Code

Black Muslim elements are woven into Afrofuturist poetry, music, film, and art, part of an American Islam that has survived a brutal history of suppression by taking flight, going underground, being translated into code, and forming secret brotherhoods and sisterhoods. A flourishing of Afrofuturist creative activity plays on the conceptualization of space-time collapse as a means of combatting the erasure of cultural memory. Religious tropes of revival, resurrection, and rebirth suggest survival in the face of the onslaught against Black life, partly through the decoding of hidden transcripts decipherable mainly to initiates. As the time traveler says in John Akomfrah's Afrofuturist film *The Last Angel of History* (1996) the poet figure conducts an archaeological dig, finding fragments, fossils: "If you can put those elements together, you'll crack that code and it will give you the keys to the future."⁹² The Afro-Asiatic religion of Islam provided one of the keys to that cosmic code, through the very survival—called a resurrection—of Black knowledge of the Islamic past.

Poets, artists, and musicians of the BAM like Sun Ra and Baraka channeled language and teachings of the MSTA and NOI into their work, but they also gave a shout out to an Islamic past coded into Black life and art. Islam is conceived as a vehicle not just for salvation, but also for escaping intransigent structures of racial oppression, partly through the revival and resurrection of this Islamic past in a strange land, far from its origins, in a distant future, and in a new form. Scholars like Isiah Lavender observe how the "African American historical and

cultural condition is inherently the stuff of sf": an experience of abduction by aliens, spatial and temporal dislocation, and enslavement in strange lands.⁹³ The BAM envisioned alternate modes of Black sovereignty, ones that included NOI (and earlier, UNIA, MSTA, and other Black nationalist) concepts of extra-territoriality and a "land of our own."⁹⁴ BAM poets, artists, and musicians coded some of this imagery into their poetry, art, drama, and music, using the esoteric language of angels, devils, and planes integral to the theology of the MSTA and the NOI.

Artistic production—like in the pioneering work of Jenn Nkiru, Moor Mother, and Janelle Monae, among others—weave elements from African American Islamic movements into their Afrofuturist visions. Jenn Nkiru's gorgeously vivid short film *REBIRTH IS NECESSARY* (2017) exuberantly celebrates Black life with footage of dancers played backward, spliced with archival footage played forward, meeting somewhere in the middle as a continuum. Woven into her imagery is Nation of Islam dress, language, and teachings, as Nation women march and salute, with an NOI flag in the background. As a song with the lyrics "Black is beautiful" fades into the background, the women stand at attention, chanting: "We are soldiers for the Nation of Islam/ Mission is to save the blind, deaf, and dumb/ Ten thousand fearless for Farrakhan."⁹⁵ A few months after the film premiered, Janelle Monae released her own Afrofuturistic, queer, feminist, tribute to the Nation, "Django Jane," wearing a red and a green suit in MSTA colors and her own interpretation of Elijah Muhammad's fez—with its own cosmic references to Islamic signs of the sun, moon, and star as representative of what he called the

“physical work of Freedom, Justice, and Equality.”⁹⁶ More work needs to be done to better understand how Black Muslim teachings, ideas, and theologies shape the Afrofuturist imaginary.

Artists like Kameelah Janan Rasheed have done important archival art work on the MSTA, as have writers like Solayman Idris who, in his *Star Logic*, theorizes Islamic identification as “transatlantic fugitivity and repatriation initiated by falling heavenly bodies ... bridging gaps between multiple states of being and now.”⁹⁷ Moorish iconography surfaces in the Afrofuturistic art and music of Moor Mother (whose name also pays homage to Queen Mother Moore), showing her dressed in Moorish costume on her album *Fetish Bones* (2016). Tracks on her album *Black Encyclopedia of the Air* (2021) revive literary, poetic, and musical ancestors, including Baraka and Sun Ra. Her “Nighthawk of Time” references Sun Ra’s earliest band the Nighthawks of Harmony and “Zami” references Sun Ra’s *We Travel the Space Ways*, Baraka’s *It’s Nation Time*, and Audre Lorde’s “biomythography” *Zami* (1982). “It’s colored people’s time/ no more master’s time/ we travel the space waves,” she sings.⁹⁸ She also sings “It’s Zamani time” referencing John Mbiti’s concept in *African Religions and Philosophy* of “the ocean of time in which everything becomes absorbed into a reality that is neither after nor before.”⁹⁹

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Solayman Idris's *Times of the Signs* trilogy applies metaphysical principles, strategic planning and grand design to African American global futures. Idris's New World Mahdist Literatures politicize weapons of spiritual war and call for establishment the newest continental African Nation State, "Orun," as reparations for American Descendants of Slaves. A literary Ark of the Covenant *Sunrise in the West*, *StarLogic*, and *Dusk Orientalis* tell us how we got here and guide Us to where We're going ...